

Chapter 11

VANUATU

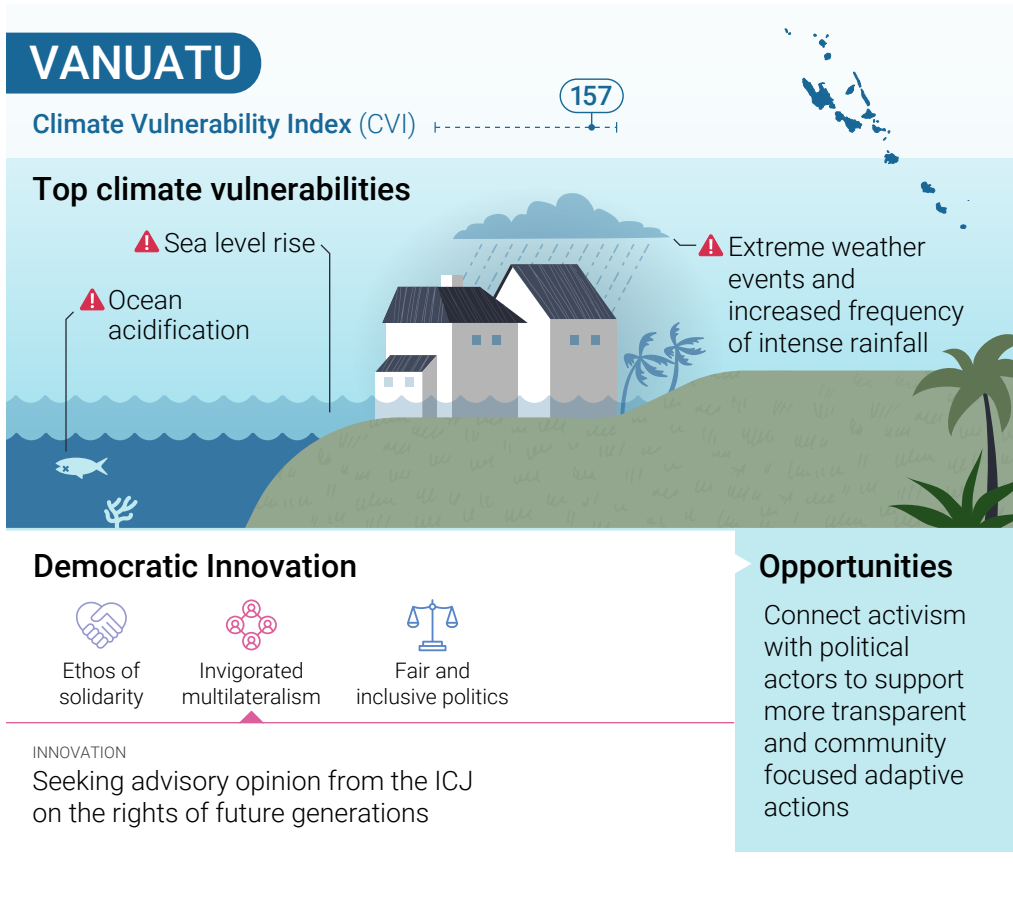
11.1. INTRODUCTION

In the Pacific Islands region and across the globe, Vanuatu is acknowledged as one of the nations most vulnerable to climate change. While the threat of sea level rise is less of an issue compared to atoll nations such as Kiribati and Tuvalu, Vanuatu's risk of natural disaster, particularly linked to cyclones, means that the climate crisis is already having profound effects on the state. The implications arising from the intersection of the impacts of climate change and Vanuatu's democracy, which has been characterized as turbulent and fragmented (Cox et al. 2007; Freedom House 2021; Veenendaal 2021), remain to be seen. They must be considered in the context of a widely dispersed rural population that relies heavily on subsistence food production and local governance systems, in the absence of any substantive connection with the state.

National politics in Vanuatu is highly fluid and personality driven, and the proliferation of political parties creates difficulties with forming a majority government. Vanuatu experienced a protracted push for independence driven by key political parties divided along Francophone and Anglophone lines, which derived from the dual administrative arrangements of the pre-independence period. Over the past three decades, however, the relative cohesion of the political party system has weakened, resulting in political fragmentation and instability (Morgan 2008; Veenendaal 2021). For example, the most recent election in 2020 brought to power Vanuatu's third consecutive

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Figure 11.1. Vanuatu



all-male parliament with representatives from 18 political parties that lack substantial differentiation in terms of ideology or policy commitments (Howard 2020). Women have been absent from parliament since 2012, and only five women parliamentarians have been elected since independence.

In what could be described as the most tumultuous period in Vanuatu politics, the government changed 21 times in 24 years in the period 1991–2015 (Barbara and Baker 2019). Motions of no confidence are frequent, and accountability mechanisms have been used to dismiss or imprison members of parliament in connection with allegations of bribery and corruption (Van Trease 2016, 2017). Vanuatu's lack of

political stability means that it is difficult to focus concerted political action on political actors or advocate consistently (Barbara and Baker 2019).

Independent media, newspapers and radio stations are active in Vanuatu and work to hold government to account, although at times the government has used strategies to limit the media's scrutiny (see e.g. McGarry 2019). Vanuatu has a rating of 'narrowed' from the CIVICUS Monitor, which rates the degree to which citizens are able to express their views and exercise their rights in the civic space (CIVICUS Monitor 2022a). A recent example of why Vanuatu has this rating, which is the next level down from 'open', is the government's refusal to allow a proposed strike by the Vanuatu Teachers' Union in 2022 (CIVICUS Monitor 2022b).

Vanuatu recently celebrated its 40th anniversary of independence with a nine-day holiday, public processions and other celebrations, which demonstrated a strong sense of pride in Vanuatu's sovereign status. Organizations such as the Vanuatu Cultural Centre have played an important role in revisiting and valuing local and traditional sources of knowledge and governance (*kastom*) in communities across Vanuatu (Bolton 2003). Valuing the 'local' over perceived outsider interference is a consistent and important theme in politics, and this has provided a platform for key political actors to develop their support base (see e.g. Rousseau 2012).

The state-building project in Vanuatu is 'unfinished' (Cox et al. 2007) in terms of both state reach outside of urban centres and citizens' (particularly rural) expectations of government. Remoteness and reach are real issues in a context where a largely rural population is spread across 65 of Vanuatu's 83 islands. Vanuatu's Constitution and associated legislation provide for decentralized government through provincial and municipal government authorities, which comprise 72 area councils across six provinces. In practice, however, diverse systems of local governance, such as village councils headed by a chief, provide the main source of governance and decision making, as well as justice systems, for many *ni-Vanuatu* (Brown and Nolan 2008; Morgan 2013). Democracy therefore works in hybridized ways, whereby citizens engage with authority through mechanisms such as

elections, but also through the systems of obligation and reciprocity embedded in social systems.

11.2. CLIMATE VULNERABILITY AND ACTION

Successive assessments over the past decade have ranked Vanuatu as extremely vulnerable to climate change due to the high risk of natural disasters (Behlert et al. 2020). It is ranked 135th of 182 countries on the University of Notre Dame's Global Adaptation Initiative (ND-GAIN) Index for 2020, where it features as the 25th most vulnerable country and the 117th most ready country (University of Notre Dame 2022a, 2022b). Vanuatu's vulnerability ranking is partly due to projected changes in cereal crop yields and agricultural capacity, and its high dependency on external resources for health services due to, among other things, insufficient medical staff (University of Notre Dame 2022b).

Climate predictions for Vanuatu foresee increasing land and ocean temperatures, larger than global average sea level rise, coral bleaching and ocean acidification affecting fish stocks and more intense cyclones. While rainfall is not expected to change overall, an increased frequency of intense rainfall events is anticipated (Vanuatu Meteorology and Geo-hazard Department et al. 2015). Intense rainfall can lead to groundwater contamination, particularly where Vanuatu still has active volcanoes (National Advisory Committee on Climate Change 2007). In addition, most of the infrastructure on the main islands is situated in coastal areas, which makes Vanuatu vulnerable to sea level rise or storm surges (National Advisory Committee on Climate Change 2007).

In 2015, Cyclone Pam had a major impact on the people, environment and economy, notably of the capital, Port Vila, and the eastern and southern islands. This was the first Category 5 cyclone to make landfall in the Pacific Islands region, but it was followed by Category 5 Cyclone Harold in 2020. Cyclone Harold is estimated to have affected just over half of Vanuatu's population, particularly in the northern provinces, and left an estimated 87,000 people without homes (Australian Government n.d.). The costs of rebuilding have already exceeded the national government's capacity. The frequency

of serious climate events has been described by former foreign minister Ralph Regenvanu as having placed Vanuatu in a permanent state of emergency (Wewerinke-Singh and Salili 2020). Natural disasters have also severely affected tourism, which is an important economic sector and a key driver of economic development.

Vanuatu is highly dependent on aid for adaptation, mitigation and recovery following disasters, and this has real implications for democracy in a time of climate crisis. For example, rebuilding in Port Vila after Cyclone Pam occurred rapidly due to the proximity of the port to inflows of humanitarian assistance and the ‘biggest problem was not in attracting enough aid, but managing its distribution’ (Van Trease 2016). Similarly, when Cyclone Harold hit Vanuatu concurrently with the Covid-19 state of emergency, the Vanuatu Skills Partnership (VSP)—a human resource development and training programme funded through the Australian aid programme—was relied on heavily to coordinate the government’s emergency response. This approach contrasted with, and was prompted by, the previous over-reliance on external consultants for disaster management, rather than investment in local capacity (Vanuatu Skills Partnership 2020). In this context, the politics of adaptation are likely to have a significant impact on Vanuatu’s climate response (Sovacool et al. 2017), where adaptation projects are funded externally, rely on external assistance rather than local capacity and are prone to elite capture at the community level.

Vanuatu is active at the international level. It ratified the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1993, submitted its first National Communication to the UNFCCC in 1999 and provided a national plan of action in 1999 (Government of Vanuatu 1999; National Advisory Committee on Climate Change 2007). Vanuatu is also taking international legal action on a number of fronts as a means of pursuing climate justice. For example, Vanuatu is exploring the possibility of using international law to sue carbon-emitting governments and the fossil fuel industry for the climate change-related costs of loss or damage to low-carbon nations (Esswein and Zernack 2020; Wewerinke-Singh and Salili 2020). It is also seeking an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice on the rights of future generations to be protected from climate change (Jackson 2022).

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Civil society in Vanuatu is also active on climate change mitigation and adaptation issues. *Women I Tok Tok Tugeta* and the Vanuatu Climate Action Network (VCAN) are key advocates for action on climate change (Sterrett 2015; Cornish 2018) and VCAN is an important player credited with increasing the inclusion of community priorities in government policy. This remains limited, however, as the information on climate change exchanged in such forums is not easily disseminated more broadly due to the difficulty of reaching rural communities (Sterrett 2015). Where VCAN has organized climate justice marches, protest is directed at international actors rather than calls for greater equity in domestic responses to climate impacts.

In the run-up to the COP 26 negotiations in Glasgow, for example, citizens marched in a climate action parade organized collaboratively by government and civil society. The key players were the Ministry of Climate Change, the British High Commission, VCAN, Wan Smol Bag Theatre, ActionAid and Oxfam. Government and civil society actors share the same political focus in calling for other countries to phase out fossil fuels and advocating for climate justice. Rather than focusing on domestic issues related to service delivery or climate adaptation, political mobilization was based more on a sense of unity in Vanuatu against external threats such as the lack of action by carbon-emitting countries. Vanuatu was limited to an online presence at COP 26 due to the travel challenges linked to Covid-19. This underscored the importance of collaborative regional approaches to negotiations at COP 26, such as through the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) and Vanuatu's membership of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), which had in-person representatives at the negotiations.

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Thus, the political focus of climate action in Vanuatu is directed at international rather than domestic injustice, and the Vanuatu Government is active in global and regional climate forums calling for international actors to take stronger mitigation actions and reduce carbon emissions.

11.3. HOW DOES THE CLIMATE CRISIS INTERSECT WITH THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN VANUATU?

The dynamics of political economy described above and the related instability in Vanuatu's political system tend to promote political short-termism, which undermines the prospects for implementing long-term structural reforms necessary to support climate adaptation (Cox et al. 2007). Electoral competition is conducted on highly localized and personalized terms, in which political elites achieve electoral success through patronage and by mobilizing kinship networks. Voter decisions may be based on the direct benefits received from candidates, rather than party ideology or policy which is largely absent from many political parties. Rice, solar panels and other benefits can be used to entice voters; and a big reputation and personality are important factors in gaining voter recognition at election time. Reciprocity, obligation and religious affiliation are important foundations for success among candidates (Van Trease 2005). Political fragmentation and patronage systems have prevented substantial infrastructure development and service delivery (Cox et al. 2007; Van Trease 2016). In this context, there is limited space for widespread implementation of policy responses to complex issues such as climate change.

Political dynamics aside, Vanuatu's planning state faces important challenges in implementing significant adaptive initiatives. As noted above, the post-colonial state in Vanuatu has been described as unfinished (Cox et al. 2007). Government resources and infrastructure development are largely concentrated in Port Vila, and the government faces significant capacity and resource challenges in delivering services to its widely dispersed rural population. The fragility of the formal state system has elevated the importance of *kastom* and traditional governance systems which operate, to varying degrees, within and alongside formal democratic systems. The *kastom* systems are particularly important in rural areas and are one of the main ways in which *ni-Vanuatu* citizens engage with authority.

Vanuatu is notable for its success at hybridizing its political system by incorporating customary institutions into national systems, such as through its Council of Chiefs, the *Malvatu Mauri*. However, ongoing issues of connectivity remain between formal and informal systems

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and the degree to which customary and traditional governance systems are able to work alongside formal state systems to improve localized service delivery. These institutional complexities will affect Vanuatu's capacity to deliver adaptive policies in areas outside of the capital and the large centres.

Vanuatu's hybridized political system has important implications for the exercise of democratic accountabilities and the nature of political participation. While Vanuatu has an established and resilient democratic system, its traditional and customary institutions are more opaque and—to the degree that they are incorporated into democratic institutions—have the potential to compromise accountabilities. The interaction of customary and introduced political institutions has important consequences for who might influence policy decisions and how scarce public resources are allocated. Access to material resources and services is often dictated by social ties of kinship, island or provincial identity, church affiliation or elite school networks (Rousseau and Kenneth-Watson 2018), rather than more abstract, long-term notions of the national interest or public good. Such systems also operate in ways that can undermine public accountability. It is generally perceived that corruption is widespread in the public sector and in parliament (Morgan 2013; Rousseau and Kenneth-Watson 2018).

The social dynamics referred to above are important in determining who can participate in public policymaking processes. Most notably, women have been marginalized as decision makers in the national parliament and the key government ministries. Women are also marginalized in customary institutions, where they face exclusionary social norms and customary practices. The structural factors noted above also mean that the prospects for collective action and a solidaristic ethos on climate change remain limited.

The personalized nature of politics can make it difficult for civil society and other activist groups to influence policymaking. Where institutions are fragile, it can be difficult for communities and civil society groups to find opportunities to engage. This is particularly the case where civil society groups find themselves dependent on external donor support and can therefore be perceived as having been captured by outsider influence (Barbara and Baker 2019). For

example, recent efforts to promote fairer and more inclusive politics, such as the *Vote Women* quota campaign facilitated by Oxfam and led by *ni-Vanuatu* nationals, was dismissed as interference in Vanuatu's domestic politics (see Baker 2019). The implications this may have for perceptions of foreign interference in climate networks facilitated by aid partners, such as *Women I Tok Tok Tugeta* or VCAN, are yet to play out. Other efforts to include women are considered token rather than credible and, as referred to above, social hierarchies tend to exclude young people from decision making.

Vanuatu's general dependency on aid and resource development makes it vulnerable to elite capture of the politics of climate change adaptation. The exploitation of customary land, driven by foreign investors and facilitated by political elites, has been a long-term source of instability (McDonnell 2017). Given Vanuatu's dependence on donor funding, and the anticipated high volume of incoming climate funding, it is likely that vested interests will exercise considerable influence in shaping the country's adaptation response and selecting its beneficiaries—both internal and external. Mechanisms such as the Global Environment Facility (GEF) have effectively established a 'node of power beyond the state' (Sovacool et al. 2017). These arrangements have strengthened the climate change adaptation sector—donors, agencies, international NGOs and scientific organizations—rather than the intended beneficiaries of the GEF—governments and the citizens of less developed countries. Unless efforts are made to ensure transparency, localization and genuine participation in adaptation initiatives, these dynamics are likely to be repeated in Vanuatu.

At the local levels, elite capture of climate adaptation projects has exacerbated existing inequalities in social hierarchies, leading to jealousy and disputes (Buggy and McNamara 2016). High levels of dissatisfaction have been noted with climate adaptation projects administered through local governance systems, particularly due to the dominance of chiefs and local patriarchal structures which tend to exclude women, people with disabilities and young people. In instances where communities have been required to relocate, disengagement by young people has been noted because traditional hierarchies exclude them from having a voice in decision making at the local level (Warrick 2011).

Shared concerns about climate change could be an important source of innovation in helping a relatively fragmented polity to begin to take collective action on adaptive preparations. Vanuatu has a strong degree of cultural cohesion and sense of self-reliance (Rousseau 2012). This provides a basis for national collective action that can at times be mobilized to support policy reform. On the use of *kastom* to support reform in the skills sector, for example, see Barbara (2020). There are also signs that climate change is supporting innovation, in terms of development directed at strengthening the capacity of the state to act in a planning capacity. As highlighted above, the national government has ratified multilateral frameworks and developed a range of climate change adaptation policies, but it faces ongoing challenges in the area of implementation.

At the same time, there is evidence that climate change adaptation is driving new forms of local state-building with the capacity to address longstanding state fragilities and state–society deficits. For example, while the VSP is an aid-funded programme, it is driven by local leaders who have invested significantly in local relationships, networks and leadership development. The VSP provides an example of commitment to subtle but effective local state-building with an emphasis on trust- and relationship-building rather than dehumanized rational policymaking processes, and could provide important lessons for further decentralization of the state (Barbara 2020).

11.4. THREATS TO DEMOCRACY FROM THE CLIMATE CRISIS AND POSSIBLE RESPONSES

Vanuatu will face serious challenges as it tries to adapt to the impacts of climate change. By putting pressure on Vanuatu’s political, economic and social systems in the context of its fragmented polity, climate change may exacerbate these fragilities, thereby raising questions about the legitimacy of democratic institutions and their ability to address the needs of citizens.

As democracy and identities in Vanuatu are highly localized, climate change will add to existing pressures but is unlikely to dramatically alter the nature of democracy. It is more likely that Vanuatu’s political systems will be overwhelmed by the continuing crises driven by

climate change, which are undermining the prospects for inclusive governance.

However, there are also signs that climate change is a driver of democratic innovation, as evidenced in the way climate change is motivating new forms of political action, often in collaboration with globalized activist networks. It remains to be seen whether such activism will connect with domestic political actors to support more transparent and community-focused adaptive actions. Climate change may also be driving new forms of subnational state building, as the government works to help vulnerable communities respond to the impacts of climate disasters. Innovation is particularly notable in areas where the impacts of climate change are most pressing, such as disaster response.

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