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**Briefing**

Humanitarian Assistance
in the Pacific

# An Evaluation of Australia’s Response to Cyclone Pam

**February 2017**

When Cyclone Pam hit Vanuatu in March 2015, it was the most powerful cyclone ever recorded in the southern Pacific region. Over half of Vanuatu’s population, an estimated 188,000 people, were affected. Many homes, livelihoods and essential services were damaged or destroyed (Figure 1).

As the scale of destruction exceeded the response capacity of national systems, the Vanuatu Government requested international assistance. Many governments and humanitarian organisations responded and a global appeal raised A$58 million.

The Vanuatu Government activated comprehensive disaster plans, and made it clear that it intended to lead and control the humanitarian response. This was challenging given the size of the international response and because many responders, working in the ways they are accustomed to, prioritised speed over aligning with and supporting local systems.

Australia responded rapidly to specific requests for assistance from the Vanuatu Government allocating over A$15 million to a relief and recovery operation (Figure 2). The Australian Defence Force also made a major contribution providing personnel and assets at a scale and with a functional capacity that would not have been available otherwise (estimated to have cost
A$17 million).

The Office of Development Effectiveness (ODE) evaluated Australia’s response to Cyclone Pam to identify what should be done to improve the effectiveness of future humanitarian responses in the Pacific. The evaluation focussed on the most severely affected islands—Tanna, Erromango and Efate.

Overall, the evaluation found that Australia’s response aligned with commitments in the department’s Humanitarian Action Plan and was effective in supporting the Vanuatu Government to deliver much needed assistance to communities.

Figure 1: The path and impact of Cyclone Pam

Figure 2: Some of the achievements of Australian Assistance

## Summary of Evaluation Findings

* Australia’s rapid, large response was justified.
* The Australian whole-of-government response was coordinated and coherent.
* Strategic use of established partnerships facilitated the fast and efficient delivery of much needed assistance.
* After the initial rapid response, assistance could have slowed down to align with the speed of local systems.
* A clear priority for DFAT was supporting local ownership. Providing technical assistance to support government capacity was crucial in the response phase. Direct funding to the health and education ministries enabled them to lead recovery processes.
* Local private sector and civil society expertise and capacity could have been more fully utilised.
* Distribution of relief items focussed on the most severely affected provinces and key needs for shelter and food.
* The distribution of relief items was uniform as requested by the Vanuatu Government and communities.
* Disadvantaged communities and individuals that were more vulnerable were not given additional assistance.
* Assistance could have better supported a broader range of needs including livelihood recovery.
* Cash transfers could not be used as suitable mechanisms had not been established in advance of the crisis.
* The capacity to build on Australia’s development programs was limited by the lack of suitable funding mechanisms.
* The scale of the response and complexity of balancing competing priorities stretched the capacity of the Australian High Commission in Port Vila.
* Lessons learned were used to improve the response to Cyclone Winston in Fiji.

## Recommendations

The evaluation made five recommendations to improve the effectiveness of future humanitarian responses to rapid onset crises in the south Pacific region.

### RECOMMENDATION 1

**DFAT should continue to progress work to support nationally led responses and localisation by:**

* defining what is meant by localisation and unifying implementing partners around a common understanding of localisation;
* in advance of a crisis, identifying local, national and regional partners, including from the private sector and civil society, who could contribute effectively to a humanitarian response, and mechanisms that could be used to support them in the event of a crisis; and
* exploring options for Pacific crisis response teams.

### RECOMMENDATION 2

**DFAT should seek to improve the targeting of assistance to those most in need and to better match needs by:**

* working with partner governments ahead of and during a crisis to identify how assistance can be targeted to those most in need;
* working with all implementing partners and Australian agencies to increase, where possible, alignment of assistance with strategic priorities, notably gender equality and women’s empowerment, disability inclusiveness and protection;
* exploring mechanisms through which small and medium-size businesses can be supported to recover after crises; and
* establishing mechanisms and relationships so that cash transfer programming can gradually become a standard feature of humanitarian responses in the Pacific.

### RECOMMENDATION 3

**DFAT should work to further bridge the humanitarian–development divide by:**

* identifying prior to a response the strengths and relationships within the bilateral program that can be leveraged in a humanitarian response and incorporating surge funding capacity into bilateral contracts.

### RECOMMENDATION 4

**DFAT should strengthen its communication and accountability by:**

* developing a short written statement or action plan that outlines the overall purpose, strategic priorities, suite of partners and approach of Australia’s assistance, and making the plan available to partners at the outset of a response; and
* encouraging and supporting implementing partners to improve accountability to national governments by providing timely, concise reports.

### RECOMMENDATION 5

**DFAT should ensure its internal capacity to deliver humanitarian action is appropriate by:**

* ensuring staff at posts have been provided with appropriate training about humanitarian principles, policy and operations; and
* exploring mechanisms for lengthening and improving the phasing of short-term humanitarian deployments.

DFAT management has agreed with all of the recommendations. The full evaluation report, including the management response, is available at dfat.gov.au/ode.

**Office of Development Effectiveness**

DFAT’s Office of Development Effectiveness (ODE) monitors the performance of the Australian aid program, evaluates its impact and contributes to international evidence and debate about aid and development effectiveness.