



Management Response to the Evaluation of the Tropical Cyclone Harold Recovery Program, Vanuatu

The *Tropical Cyclone Harold Recovery Program (HRP)* is a five-year, AUD 21.8 million investment (2021–2026) funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) in response to the catastrophic impacts of Tropical Cyclone Harold—a Category 5 storm that struck Vanuatu in April 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. The program’s goal was to restore growth and social development in cyclone-affected areas while strengthening the Government of Vanuatu’s (GoV) systems for recovery. The HRP was implemented primarily through a Direct Funding Arrangement (DFA) with the Prime Minister’s Office, using GoV systems for reconstruction of education, health and WASH infrastructure, as well as through the Vanuatu Skills Partnership (VSP) and Australian Humanitarian Partnership (AHP) NGOs focusing on livelihoods, gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI), and community resilience.

Vanuatu’s recovery landscape since 2020 has been shaped by cascading crises — the COVID-19 pandemic, repeated cyclones (Judy, Kevin, Lola), and the 2024 Port Vila earthquake — which have severely strained fiscal resources, institutional capacity, and infrastructure systems. These compounded shocks placed extraordinary demands on GoV institutions and personnel, limiting implementation progress. Political instability, high staff turnover, and successive emergencies have created an environment of perpetual recovery, complicating the delivery and continuity of governance. Within this challenging context, the HRP’s achievement and operational effectiveness must be interpreted as part of a wider humanitarian and recovery system under sustained pressure.

DFAT commissioned an independent evaluation in late 2025 to inform decisions around extension of the HRP, DFAT’s broader engagement through GoV systems and approaches to future recovery programming. The evaluation has determined that four years on, progress is well underway in all sectors but has been slower than anticipated. It is difficult to tell whether the limited progress can be attributed to the delivery modality or the program’s implementation challenges. Furthermore, HRP has struggled to land an agreed MEL framework and an agreed MEL plan, so results have not been captured well to confirm whether progress is adequate.

The evaluation made seven recommendations, all of which are outlined in the table below, with DFAT’s management response to each. The review’s primary recommendation is #7. DFAT has chosen to disagree with this recommendation for reasons outlined in the table.

Priority Recommendation

Review Recommendation	Response	Explanation	Action Plan	Indicative Timeline
1. Future DFA agreements should consider the accompanying technical and project management support that is required, particularly finance, procurement, GEDSI and M&E.	Agree	DFAT recognises that insufficient technical and management support constrained implementation and oversight under HRP. DFA modalities require stronger embedded technical and program management support to function effectively.	DFAT Port Vila Post will ensure lessons from this evaluation are presented at relevant development program meetings to inform current and future designs. Some options DFAT will consider for future program designs: ▪ Incorporate dedicated technical assistance (TA) packages (finance, procurement, GEDSI, MEL) into DFA designs ▪ Assess delivery options (embedded advisers, contractors, pooled support) and allocate appropriate resourcing for program management and capability support ▪ Utilise existing Australian Volunteers program to deliver gender equality capacity required during program design and implementation ▪ Utilise a hybrid delivery model (e.g. contractor-managed project support units embedded in GoV). This was highly recommended by the GoV	Options will be shared with other bilateral and regional DFAT programs operating in Vanuatu in Q3 2026 to inform future program designs
2. The balance of funding in future Recovery programs between using DFA and AHP (or other contractor-led/NGO-led) responses should be more evenly weighted to balance policy imperative and government systems strengthening with efficiency in delivery.	Agree in principle	DFAT will maintain a balanced approach, tailored to context, to meet both localisation and delivery efficiency objectives. This recommendation acknowledges the speed at which recovery programs can be implemented outside of GoV systems. The funding ratio should be flexible and defined by the nature of the disaster and the operating context. Maintaining an evenly weighted funding balance can restrict some high priority areas from being addressed.	DFAT Port Vila Post will share the below approaches with relevant bilateral and regional programming areas for future programming options to: ▪ Ensure stronger integration between DFA and partner-delivered components to avoid fragmentation ▪ Explicitly design programs with complementary roles for each delivery channel. DFAT Port Vila Post plans to undertake stakeholder mapping of institutions to identify strengths, weaknesses and comparative advantages of each prior to determining funding modalities and envelopes. This will also be informed by GoV's Post Disaster Needs Assessments.	Options will be shared with other bilateral and regional DFAT programs operating in Vanuatu in Q3 2026 to inform future program designs
3. There should be a specific funding allocation for the Department of Women's Affairs in future recovery efforts (in addition to key sectoral ministries), given enhanced capacity and catalytic role emerging in supporting sector clusters and Provincial and Area	Partially agree	DFAT acknowledges the Department of Women's Affairs (DoWA) critical role in GEDSI coordination and inclusive recovery. DFAT partially agrees with this recommendation noting that more work will need to be done to better understand and identify key priority areas for support and the best modality for support.	DFAT Port Vila Post's Humanitarian team will share the HRP review findings and recommendations with relevant program teams to inform new designs. Post's Humanitarian team will discuss findings and recommendations with Port Vila Post's gender team to align priorities and identify opportunities for support. DFAT Post will share these recommendations with design consultants to inform future programming in Vanuatu. Options to consider include:	HRP review findings and recommendations will be shared with relevant teams in Q3 2026

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Council planning and delivery			- directing budget allocations to DoWA in future recovery programs - Requiring GEDSI integration across all program components, not only NGO streams - Strengthening links between DoWA and cluster coordination mechanisms - Exploring provincial outreach opportunities, i.e. through Vanuatu Skills Program, Australia Assists, etc.	
4. The GoV through DSSPAC's Disaster Recovery Coordination Unit should continue to refresh their institutional arrangements and responsibilities in light of the Disaster Recovery and Resilience Act and update their approach to utilizing Development Partner funds and coordination with line Ministries. This work is already underway.	Agree in principle (GoV-led)	DFAT supports GoV leadership in reforming recovery coordination and institutional arrangements. DFAT agrees that DSPPAC should retain a coordination role but not be responsible for direct implementation. DFAT supports this recommendation noting that the legislation will bring additional responsibilities for the Disaster Recovery Coordination Unit (DRCU). The DRCU is working on several operational guidelines and reviewing its organisational structure to strengthen its recovery coordination role.	DFAT to continue supporting this work through existing lines of effort, including the Australia Assists (AA) Program This will include: - GoV implementation of the Disaster Recovery and Resilience Act - Establishing clearer roles, SOPs, and governance frameworks for recovery programming. DFAT Port Vila Post's future investments will consider: - Shifting future disaster recovery DFA arrangements to direct engagement with line ministries, with DSPPAC retaining an oversight and coordination role - Aligning funding flows with existing sector programs and systems to reduce bottlenecks.	Contract with AA deployee in the DRCU has been extended until January 2027 Ongoing engagement between DFAT and the DRCU
5. Future Recovery Funding could be structured as a 'top-up' to an existing, longer-term program of support to enhance longer term resilience and institutional sustainability.	Agree	DFAT will look at strengthening links between recovery and longer-term resilience programming DFAT agrees that standalone recovery programs can create inefficiencies and delays, and that recovery could sit within a longer-term resilience framework.	DFAT Port Vila Post and regional programs operating in Vanuatu will consider: - Allowing flexibility within programs to integrate recovery financing (top-ups) into multi-year sector and resilience programs, for example, the existing Vanuatu bilateral health and education programs. - Using pre-existing delivery platforms to enable faster mobilisation after disasters (AHP, VSP, DFAs, MCs, etc) - Aligning recovery investments with ongoing DFAT sector portfolios (health, education) - Ensuring recovery funding contributes to institutional capacity building between shocks.	Ongoing design work will consider building in flexibility to absorb disaster recovery funding. Ongoing

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6. DFAT should strengthen its capacity to be agile in program management, making real time adjustments to structures and implementation strategies according to changes in circumstances and progress.	Partially Agree	DFAT acknowledges the need for stronger adaptive management in dynamic contexts	DFAT Port Vila Post plans to strengthen its internal governance structures to improve agility in future programming ▪ Embed adaptive management mechanisms (scenario planning, trigger points for change) and flexible financing in program design ▪ Strengthen staff capability in adaptive programming and political economy analysis ▪ Improve internal coordination across humanitarian and development streams.	Ongoing
7. The TCH Recovery Program should end on 30 June 2026 in line with the original agreement and design. Unspent funds in the DFA Trust Fund should be allocated by the National Recovery Committee (NRC) with DFAT approval to the relevant line Ministries for specific Activities as part of their ongoing work program and incorporated into their Business Plans. DFAT should manage ongoing activities as part of existing sector programs.	Disagree	This recommendation was made based on analysis of overall progress to date and noting the investment end date of 20 June 2026. After further consultation and advice, it was noted that the DFA is a 7-year arrangement, and ending the investment would trigger DFAT to request unspent funds to be returned. The decision was made to do a no cost extension until June 2028 to allow funds to be spent and activities to be complete.	DFAT has extended the investment end date to align with the DFA end date of June 2028 DRCU has been informed of this decision and advised that all ongoing and agreed activities will proceed as planned to completion. DFAT Port Vila Post’s Humanitarian team propose to strengthen its internal M&E and data collection, and reporting mechanisms in partnership with other sector programs to inform future recovery programming. All ongoing activities under the DFA are required to continue as planned with existing governance and management arrangements. Annual audits of the remaining funds by the GoV and the six-monthly reporting to NRC and DFAT Post will be maintained with overall coordination by the DRCU and oversight by the NRC.	May 2026 June 2026 Ongoing Ongoing