

UNICEF Education COVID-19 Case Study

Fiji and Vanuatu – Responding to overlapping emergencies

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The Pacific island nations of Fiji and Vanuatu are no stranger to emergencies: the countries are among the most exposed to the risks and adverse effects of climate change and natural disasters globally, including cyclones, droughts, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods and tsunamis.

COVID-19 presented a new type of disaster for both countries. Following the first case of COVID-19 in March, the Government of Fiji closed its borders and implemented stringent public health measures, including the closure of all 1,778 schools across its 332 islands, disrupting the education of more than 230,000 students. While not reporting any cases of its own, the Government of Vanuatu followed suit and implemented similar precautionary measures, closing all of its 1,453 schools, affecting more than 90,000 students.

Just one month later, as students and teachers were still adjusting to distance learning in both countries, Cyclone Harold slammed Vanuatu and Fiji as a category 5 cyclone with winds that reached 270 km/h (165 mph) affecting 180,000 and 160,000 people across the two countries and causing widespread destruction, including severe damage to more than 120 schools in Fiji and more than 1,000 schools in Vanuatu, severely compounding the challenges faced by education systems in both countries as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

The global COVID-19 pandemic made the response to Cyclone Harold especially challenging. Governments in the Pacific continue to enforce strict control measures like border closures, travel restrictions and lockdowns to prevent introduction of the virus to Vanuatu and community transmission in Fiji. Humanitarian supplies faced added challenges securing transport, quarantines before being offloaded, and restrictions for inter-island transport within each country. Home-based learning ceased for many students whose homes and communities were damaged by Cyclone Harold, and many found it difficult to return to learning as they recovered.

Despite these overlapping emergencies, only two months later, Fiji and Vanuatu successfully reopened all schools adhering to [comprehensive guidance on the safe operations of schools](#) and welcoming back all students.

KEY FEATURES

- **Responding to overlapping emergencies** – The emergency cluster coordination system was critical to mounting a coordinated response to the pandemic and the cyclone. The rapid response of the Fiji and Vanuatu Education Clusters led by the respective Ministries of Education, co-led by UNICEF and Save the Children, supported by other relevant government agencies and non-government education partners, and backed by the regional Pacific Education Cluster kept education needs at the forefront of the response to the overlapping emergencies.
- **Leveraging disaster preparedness programmes** – The governments of Fiji and Vanuatu were able to leverage their long history of preparedness for natural disasters, including disaster risk reduction programmes in schools, to rapidly respond to the twin emergencies. These programmes' well-established communication mechanisms between teachers, parents and children proved invaluable during the switch to distance learning when schools were closed, during reopening and for the monitoring of the safety and well-being of teachers and children.
- **Engaging school communities** – Actively communicating with school directors, teachers, parents and students ensured everyone was working towards the common goal of keeping children learning during school closures and swiftly and safely reopening.
- **Prioritising well-being** – Knowing the toxic impact of stress and trauma from previous emergencies, education authorities in Fiji and Vanuatu recognised the urgent need to provide comprehensive mental health and psychosocial support to teachers and students throughout the school closure and the school reopening phases.
- **Reopening after COVID and Harold** – Cyclone Harold compounded challenges faced by the education systems caused by COVID-19. To minimize the disruption to education, UNICEF provided temporary learning spaces and learning materials to affected schools, allowing more than 4,500 children in Fiji and more than 3,600 children in Vanuatu to return to school at the same time as their peers not affected by Cyclone Harold.

EMERGENT LESSONS LEARNED

- **Preparedness pays off ...** – Owing to its ample experience dealing with cyclical natural disasters and its extensive work on preparedness, including school-based disaster risk reduction, the Governments of Fiji and Vanuatu were able to minimise the disruption to children's learning despite the overlapping-emergencies of the COVID-19 pandemic and category five Cyclone Harold.
- **... but more and more comprehensive preparedness is needed** – As Fiji and Vanuatu are among the most disaster-prone countries worldwide, the COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted the need to strengthen its preparedness to new, more severe, and overlapping emergencies. Fiji and Vanuatu rose to the challenge by responding to the current pandemic but also committed to strengthen their national education system's resilience through improved contingency and response planning, including through longer-term investments in digital learning systems, in teacher training to design and manage student-led learning, and in addressing long-standing bottlenecks to make schools safer, more supportive and more inclusive.

OTHER RESOURCES

- For other resources, including more case studies, please click [here](#) and filter by "Area of Work" (Education).

For more information, please contact:

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