



Grade 4 students with their untrained teacher in TORBA Province in Vanuatu

## 2024 CIVIL SOCIETY SPOTLIGHT REPORT ON SDG 4

### I. COUNTRY CONTEXT

Vanuatu, a small island developing state, has an estimated population of 334,506 widely scattered across 65 of the 83 geographically diverse islands of the archipelago. On a per capita basis, Vanuatu is the most linguistically diverse country in the world, with 75% of the population living in rural areas and 80% relying on subsistence farming for food.<sup>1</sup> Vanuatu is one of the most at-risk countries for natural disasters, with a 56.8% likelihood of a disaster occurring every year in the country. On average annually, these disasters affect some 12% of the population and contribute to a loss of 42.8% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).<sup>2</sup>

An overall total of 99,409 students enrolled in schools during the 2022 academic year and in 2023 the overall enrolment in schools increased to 100,155 pupils (Early childhood care and education (ECCE) to Secondary). This shows progress in access to education. In 2023, the Education Budget was USD 105.6 million and in 2024 the total Education Budget increased to USD 110.4 million, an increase of 4.5% (Appropriation Bill 2023 and 2024).

In 2024, Vanuatu is still experiencing an economic downturn due to continuous inflation. In 2023, the inflation rate was 12.10% and there has been an increase of 0.3% in 2024 (Bureau of Statistics, 2024). The unemployment rate is 4% rising to 9.7% for youth (ILO, 2024). GDP growth was 1.17% in 2023 and 1.29% in the first quarter of 2024 (Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Vanuatu is still recovering from Category 4 Tropical Cyclones Judy and Kevin which hit within 48 hours in March, and Category 5 Cyclone Lola which hit in October.

The liquidation of the national airline of Vanuatu has resulted in the termination of around 200 employees (The Daily Post, May 10, 2024). This has affected the tourism industry as many tourism-related businesses have closed and employees were made redundant.

The low and middle-income populations are mostly affected economically, which means that many families cannot afford to send children to school. This affects the progress of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), particularly for universal primary education. In June 2024, the Vanuatu Teachers Union members took an industrial action, claiming that the government should pay their outstanding entitlements. Public schools were closed for two weeks which partly affected the implementation of SDG 4.

### II. PROGRESS TOWARDS THE ACHIEVEMENT OF SDG 4

#### Target 4.1: Free primary and secondary education

In 2021, Kolisen Blong Leftemap Education (KOBLE), the national education coalition in Vanuatu, released a progress report on the implementation of SDG 4 implementation in Vanuatu. While there is major progress from the Government of Vanuatu in addressing gaps in education, the 2021 Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) report found that there are still gaps in the reporting of SDG 4 key targets. The SDG 4 target areas are not prioritised or demonstrate limited progress in Targets 4.5 on Inclusive Education, 4.6 on Youth and Adult Literacy, and 4.7 on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).

The School Grant policy provides free tuition fees to primary and secondary school students of government and government-assisted schools. However, parents still bear the costs for transport, food and various contributions which go towards the school council and Parents, Teachers' Association. Education is not totally free. KoBLE is strongly advocating for compulsory education, which is one of the 2019 Universal Periodic Review recommendations.

#### Target 4.2: Equal access to quality pre-primary education

50% of children aged 3-5 are currently registered for ECCE, with a marginal gender difference favouring

COUNTRY FACTS AND FIGURES	
Population	326,741 (2022)
GNI per Capita (PPP\$)	3,770 (2023)
Income Group	Lower-Middle Income
HDI: Value/Rank	0.614 / 140th out of 193 (2022)
Education Expenditure (% National Budget)	16.6 % (2024) Source: Bill for the Appropriation (2024) Act
Literacy rate Primary	Yr 4 Male: 17% Female: 26% Average: 21%  Yr 6 Male: 41% Female: 59% Average: 50%  PILNA (2015 - 2021) Source: MoET/GPE Partnership Compact 2024
Secondary Net Enrolment Rate	Male: 60.6% Female: 72.5% Average: 66.3% Gender Parity Index: 1.2 Source: MoET Report 2023
SDG 4 Trend SDG 4 Dashboard	Significant challenges remain→ Stagnating
Risk Management Index:	
Climate-driven Hazard & Exposure	3.5 (2022) Regional Mean: 4.6
Lack of coping capacity	5.5 (2022) Regional Mean: 4.3

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Population Division, World Population Prospects: The 2022 Revision: Vanuatu: Population

<sup>2</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/vanuatu/disaster-management-reference-hand-book-june-2023-vanuatu>

\*Drought, Extreme temperature, Flood, Landslide, Cyclone, Wildfire, Volcanic Eruption, El Niño, and La Niña

females. More than half of eligible children are not within the education system at this critical stage of development. The MoET has to accelerate access and opportunity at the pre-primary level. KoBLE continues to advocate in this area through the LEG and other education meetings.



Student beneficiaries of the Free Tuition Fee Policy

### Target 4.5: Eliminate all discrimination in education

Vanuatu's vision is reflective of a commitment to fostering a society where educational opportunities are not privileges for the few but fundamental rights accessible by every individual. Inclusive education goes beyond universal access, encompassing equitable support systems that cater to diverse learning needs and backgrounds. It recognises the challenges faced by marginalised groups - including women and girls, people with disabilities, and rural populations. Lifelong learning as a goal underscores the recognition that education is not confined to the formative years but is a continuous process that enhances one's ability to navigate the complexities of adulthood, parenthood, and old age.

The Inclusive Education Policy has been reviewed in 2023 and will be launched in 2024. There are no other policies for marginalised groups such as out-of-school children and youth, and adult learners. No research has been conducted for these marginalised groups and hence there is no data available. KoBLE is advocating for research and development of these policies.

### Target 4.5: Eliminate all discrimination in education

There are multiple bottlenecks to improving primary literacy rates, according to various sources, such as the 2018 Education and Training Sector Analysis (ESTA), 2023 Joint Sector Review (JSR) Report, 2021 data from the Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA), 2021 Vanuatu Standardised Tests of Achievement (VANSTA), and other analytical reports. According to the VANSTA 2021 and the PILNA tests, the age-specific literacy rates for school students in Vanuatu range between 40% and 70%. Only 60% of teachers are fully trained. Classrooms are overcrowded (teacher-student ratio should be 1 to 30 as a maximum but this is often exceeded), the curriculum is outdated whilst materials and textbooks are few and in poor condition, and there is a lack of conducive teaching and learning environment.

An equitable quality education system should be marked by the provision of competent teachers, adequate infrastructure, a relevant and dynamic curriculum, and the use of appropriate languages of instruction, which in Vanuatu's context, involves incorporating indigenous languages and knowledge systems.

The ESPIG developed 150 new leveled and decodable reading books for early childhood education (ECE) and Year 1-3 and made these available in classroom libraries, in audio, large print, and online (<https://bloomlibrary.org/Vanuatu-Literacy-Nasara>), so there is a good base of experience for the senior primary reading program.

The table below shows that the literacy rate is declining considerably for children from grades 4 to 8. There is a need for the MoET to prioritise its initiatives on quality education.

VANSTA 2021	2018		2021		
	Language	English	French	English	French
Year 4		55%	57%	44%	47%
Year 6		72%	71%	63%	66%
Year 8		78%	74%	70%	57%

Table 1. Percentage of students reaching minimum standards, by year and language (VANSTA, 2021)

### Target 4.a: Build and upgrade inclusive and safe schools

In 2023, the MoET launched its first-ever Primary School Infrastructure guidelines which outline the building standards to build permanent child-friendly education facilities that are inclusive and gender sensitive and provide safe, cyclone resistance for education in emergency and effective learning environments for all.



A damaged classroom in Santo, SANMA Province in Vanuatu, destroyed by a tropical cyclone

### Target 4.c: Increase the supply of qualified teachers in developing countries

The MoET defines teachers as being one of the three categories: qualified, underqualified and unqualified. While the Ministry is committed to ensuring its teachers are qualified, and in compliance with its policies and the Teaching Service Commission (TSC) Act and policies, it recognises the importance of having effective teachers delivering quality education.

Some of the Ministry's legislation, such as the Teaching Services Commission Act and the Education Act, are unclear in sections, creating challenges in effectively managing teachers and principals to improve education outcomes. This lack of clarity has a cascading effect on schools and teaching and learning.

## III. CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN CLIMATE ACTION

The emerging crisis for the education sector now is the increase in disaster frequency in Vanuatu. According to the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report PEER Profile citing the Global Carbon Atlas, Vanuatu's per capita emissions were very low in 2021.

Despite this, Vanuatu is disproportionately affected by extreme weather events, such as heat waves, droughts, cyclones, and storm surges. These worsening climate-related hazards have severely disrupted the students' learning. A recent Save the Children research study, conducted by KoBLE, on the impact of the previous twin cyclones in March and April 2023, 'Harem Voes Blong Mi', shows that many families lost their livelihoods and their means of income.

There is no specific budget allocated for climate change education. The MoET has recently developed an emergency contingency plan to respond to climate-related disasters, and a budget has been allocated for this initiative.



*The Climate Change Strategy for the MoET Skills Centres mainstreams climate change in all Vanuatu Skills Partnership and MoET Skills Centres' operations and activities. Climate Change Adaptation and Disaster Risk Reduction; Climate Change Mitigation and Building Institutional Capacity are the three focus areas with six specific objectives for overall safety and resilience for service delivery in the Post-School Education and Training (PSET)/Skills sector.*



Civil society organisations (CSOs) have played a crucial role in promoting climate action through education. Save the Children's Seif Skul program partners with the New Zealand Government's aid program and the MoET to "make all children in Vanuatu be protected from violence, climate risks, disasters and everyday hazards when in and around schools" (Save the Children New Zealand, Vanuatu Seif Skul, 2023). UNICEF has also partnered with the Ministry of Education and Training and piloted a School-Based Disaster Risk Reduction Handbook in a province including training of school principals. The handbook's practical safety drills involve students, teachers, principals, and administrative staff in schools. These initiatives highlight the collaborative efforts between government agencies, NGOs, and educators to promote climate action.



Epauto SDA Secondary School Prize Winners for KoBLE Essay Competition on Education Financing

## IV. CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT IN THE SDG 4 IMPLEMENTATION, FOLLOW-UP, AND MONITORING

The government has involved Civil Society in the SDG Voluntary National Review (VNR) CSO consultations, the 2024 Global Partnership for Education (GPE) Compact Agreement process, and the Local Education Group (LEG) meetings.

KoBLE finds these processes open and inclusive to civil society participation. KoBLE continues to put pressure on these meetings to improve progress on the SDG 4 implementation. Civil society also advocates for SDG 4 implementation through the media. KoBLE however, was not informed of the SDG 4 Mid-Term Review process which was steered by UNESCO, UIS and the government.

In the 2024 Vanuatu VNR, the key message and finding states that, "Recognising the crucial role of education in development, the government has expanded school-fee subsidies and is now focusing on improving educational quality. This includes infrastructure enhancements and skills training for early school leavers, aiming to equip them better for the future."

## V. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Implement the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) recommendation on compulsory education.
- Increase the education budget to implement compulsory education by training more teachers, improving the curriculum, providing better infrastructure, improving disaster preparedness and response, and better use of languages of instruction including vernacular languages.
- Allocate funding and resources, and incorporate climate change education as a mandatory component of the national curriculum for primary and secondary schools, with specific learning objectives and teaching materials developed by the CDU.
- Strengthen mechanisms for civil society engagement in SDG implementation and monitoring processes, including the Voluntary National Review (VNR) and Mid-Term Review of SDG 4.
- Establish regular consultation mechanisms between government agencies and CSOs to ensure that civil society perspectives are integrated into policy formulation.

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The Kolisen Blong Leftemap Edukesen (KOBLE) is a national coalition of civil society organisations with the aim of engaging the Government of Vanuatu and other stakeholders on national education policy to help ensure that all ni-Vanuatu have access to good quality and inclusive publicly provided education. As advocates, we strive to make the right to education inclusive for all, with a particular focus on empowering women, individuals with disabilities, young people, marginalised communities, ethnic minorities, and children. KOBLE is a member organisation of the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPAE).

