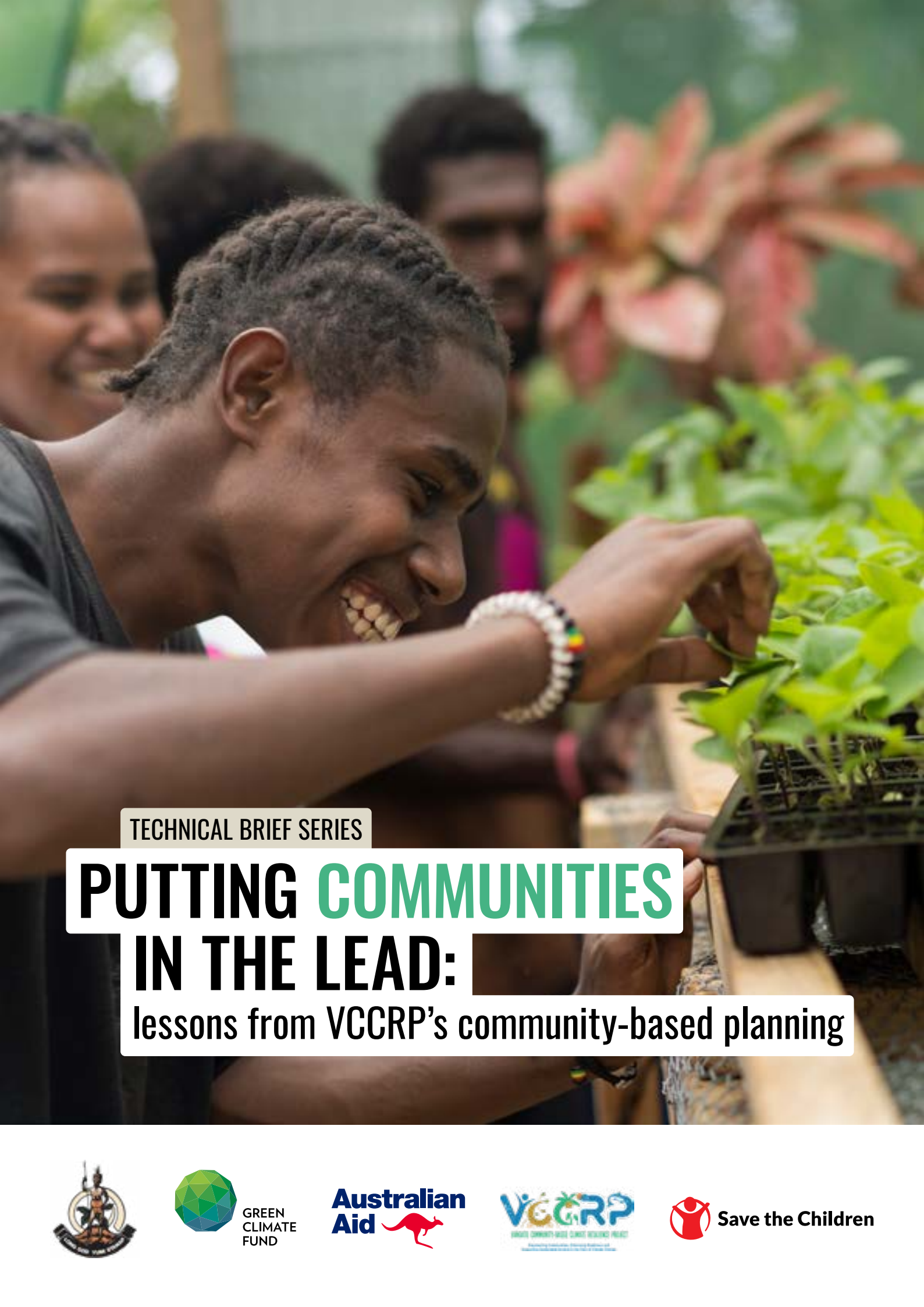
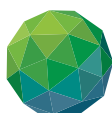




TECHNICAL BRIEF SERIES

PUTTING COMMUNITIES IN THE LEAD:

lessons from VCCRP's community-based planning



GREEN
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A photograph of two women in a rural setting, likely a community nursery. The woman in the foreground is wearing a white t-shirt with a pink bird graphic and is holding a black tray with green seedlings. She is smiling broadly. Behind her, another woman is also smiling and holding a similar tray. The background shows a field with dry grass and a tall palm tree under a cloudy sky.

Overview

This technical brief outlines the approach used under the Vanuatu Community-based Climate Resilience Project (VCCRP) to support communities in the development of community-based adaptation plans (CBAPs). Implemented by the Government of Vanuatu and Save the Children, VCCRP seeks to strengthen the capacity of climate-vulnerable communities to anticipate, plan for, and respond to climate change impacts. The project operates across 282 communities in all six provinces of Vanuatu, focusing on adaptation solutions that enhance food security, livelihoods, and ecosystem resilience while aligning with national climate and development priorities.

The VCCRP applies a participatory and community-centred model that places decision-making authority with communities themselves. Through the establishment of Community Disaster and Climate Change Committees (CDCCCs), the project supports awareness raising and educating community stakeholders, climate risk assessments, and adaptation planning. VCCRP is a six-year initiative (October 2022-October 2028), primarily financed by the Green Climate Fund, with co-financing from the Governments of Vanuatu and Australia, and Save the Children Australia. This brief explains how CBAPs were developed under the VCCRP, with the aim of informing replication, scaling, and integration into future community-based climate change programming.



This project is primarily funded by the Green Climate Fund with support by the Government of Australia.

Community members carry trays of seedlings to be planted at a community nursery on an island in Shefa Province, Vanuatu. Photo: Conor Ashleigh/Save the Children

Cover Photo: Conor Ashleigh/Save the Children

From community-based plans to locally-led adaptation ambition

Community-Based Adaptation (CBA) and Locally-Led Adaptation (LLA) are closely linked approaches that share the objective of shifting adaptation decision making closer to those most affected by climate change. However, they differ in their primary unit of action, scope of influence, and institutional focus, and therefore play distinct but complementary roles in strengthening the capacity of local actors to respond to climate change.

CBA is primarily defined by its scale and methodology. It focuses on discrete communities – villages or groups of villages – and uses participatory tools to support communities to understand climate hazards, identify vulnerabilities and risks, and prioritise adaptation actions. The technical emphasis of CBA is on facilitating inclusive local processes, integrating local knowledge with scientific climate information, and supporting the design and implementation of context specific adaptation measures.

LLA, by contrast, is defined less by a specific methodology and more by a set of [eight core system level principles](#)¹. LLA seeks to ensure that local actors in a broader sense – communities, local governments, and local organisations – have decision making authority, access to resources, and accountability for adaptation outcomes across all levels of governance. This includes reforms to planning systems, financing mechanisms, institutional mandates, and accountability relationships, so that adaptation is not only informed by local priorities but genuinely managed and progressed by local actors at scale.

In the context of Vanuatu’s decentralised governance system, these distinctions are particularly important. While decentralisation policies aim to devolve authority to provincial and subnational levels, in practice, there often remains uneven capacity, resources, and decision making power scattered across the geographically dispersed territory. CBA helps put decentralisation into action at the community level by strengthening local leadership, supporting communities to make their own decisions, and clearly linking them to area councils, provinces, and planning and funding programs run by local, provincial, and national agencies. However, CBA alone does not fully address higher level constraints related to financing flows and local governance capacity or larger structural inequalities.

In this context, CBA can be understood as a delivery mechanism for locally-led adaptation outcomes, while LLA represents the enabling environment required for these outcomes to be sustained and scaled. CBA strengthens the “supply side” of locally-led adaptation by building community capacity, leadership, and planning capability. LLA focuses on the “systems side” by devolving power, restructuring incentives, and aligning institutions so that community priorities can meaningfully guide adaptation investments and decisions.

The VCCRP primarily operates as a community-based adaptation program, with strong alignment to LLA principles. Through the establishment and strengthening of CDCCCs, participatory planning processes, and access to climate information services, VCCRP significantly advances local decision making, ownership, and accountability at the community level. These elements reflect core LLA principles related to subsidiarity, inclusion, and local agency.

At the same time, the VCCRP contributes meaningfully to the broader ambitions of LLA, while recognising that LLA is guided by a set of principles that extend beyond the scope of any single project. The project strengthens vertical linkages within Vanuatu’s decentralised governance system and supports the alignment of Community Based Adaptation Plans (CBAPs) with formal planning processes. While some system-level elements associated with LLA – such as long-term fiscal decentralisation, direct access to climate finance, and wider governance reforms – sit outside the project’s mandate, VCCRP plays an important role in building the foundations for LLA. By strengthening community level processes, governance, and planning capacity, the project demonstrates how locally driven priorities can inform and reinforce decentralised adaptation systems across Vanuatu.

¹ Principles of locally led adaptation include: (1) devolving decisions to the lowest appropriate level, (2) addressing structural inequalities, (3) ensuring patient and predictable funding, (4) investing in local institutional capacity, (5) building robust climate risk knowledge, (6) enabling flexible programming and learning, (7) ensuring transparency and accountability, and (8) fostering cross-sector collaboration.

Institutional and governance arrangements for community-based adaptation plans

VCCRP operates within Vanuatu's decentralised governance framework and aligns with national mandates for climate change adaptation, disaster risk reduction (DRR), and development planning. The project reflects the recognition that climate change impacts intersect with disaster risks and development challenges, requiring coordinated action across sectors and levels of government. The development and implementation of the CBAP process has been institutionalised within key government agencies.

In Vanuatu, the **Department of Local Authorities (DLA)** provides the overarching mandate for decentralisation of governance systems, supporting planning and decision making at provincial, area council, and community levels. VCCRP aligns with this mandate by strengthening community level governance arrangements and reinforcing vertical linkages between communities and subnational government structures.

The **National Disaster Management Office (NDMO)** is responsible for coordinating disaster risk management, including preparedness and response, with increasing attention to climate related hazards. VCCRP supports this role by strengthening community capacities for risk awareness, preparedness, and early warning, ensuring that adaptation planning contributes to reduced disaster risk.

The **Department of Climate Change (DoCC)** provides national leadership on climate change policy and adaptation planning. VCCRP aligns community-based adaptation processes with national climate priorities and guidance, supporting coherence between community actions, sectoral programs, and national strategies.

At the community level, the **VCCRP** supports the establishment and strengthening of CDCCCs as the primary governance structures for integrated adaptation and resilience planning. CDCCCs are community level governance structures established in line with Vanuatu's disaster risk management policy framework and decentralisation mandate. The role of CDCCCs reflects national guidance from NDMO on community-based disaster risk management, alongside increasing recognition of the need to integrate climate change adaptation with preparedness and resilience building.

CDCCCs operate as locally recognised coordination bodies, building on existing customary leadership and inclusive community representation (including women, youth, and other key groups). CDCCCs lead community level climate awareness, participatory risk and vulnerability assessments, and the development of CBAPs, with the support from the VCCRP.



Community engagement and participatory planning process

The development of CBAPs follows a structured planning process that combines preparatory assessments with an intensive, participatory training and planning program implemented at community level. The process is designed to build shared understanding of climate and disaster risks, strengthen local governance structures, and enable communities to lead the identification and prioritisation of adaptation actions that reflect local realities and capacities.

Prior to formal engagement in each community, area council climate change officers (ACCCOs) conduct a set of foundational assessments to inform the planning process. These include completion of:

1. **Community profile**, capturing demographic, livelihoods, infrastructure, and service information from communities.
2. **Vulnerability assessment**, including information on exposure to climate hazards and the collection of cross-cutting sectoral information on communities.
3. **CDCCC capacity assessment**, reviewing existing disaster and climate governance structures and capabilities.

These assessments provide essential baseline information on livelihoods, hazards, vulnerabilities, and governance arrangements, ensuring facilitation is grounded in local context. All assessment data is captured using standardised online surveys to support consistency, verification, and reporting.

Community engagement for CBAP development is then delivered through a four-to-five-day training and planning program. The process begins with broad community engagement to ensure transparency, legitimacy, and shared understanding. On the first day, facilitators introduce the purpose and structure of the CBAP process and work with the community to establish or review the CDCCC, including clarifying its roles and responsibilities.

An emphasis is placed on building awareness and educating community stakeholders on basic concepts related to climate change and disaster risk reduction. It is necessary to build a common understanding of key concepts, including the differences between climate variability, long-term climate change, and climate hazards, as well as the implications of these risks for vulnerable community members. This initial engagement ensures that the CDCCC is endorsed by the wider community and that adaptation planning is based on a shared knowledge foundation. Successful adaptation planning in communities first requires a common understanding of the threats and ongoing/future impacts posed by climate change.

Subsequent days focus more intensively on participatory analysis and planning with the CDCCC, while remaining open to observation and engagement by other community members. The process emphasises documentation of local knowledge and lived experience through activities such as post-disaster assessments, historical profiling, and seasonal calendars, which help communities understand how climate and disaster risks have evolved over time. Transect walks and community mapping exercises are used to identify hazard-prone areas, critical resources, and existing capacities, linking physical observations with collective discussion and analysis.

Risk prioritisation and forward-looking adaptation planning are central to the later stages of the CBAP process. Communities analyse priority hazards using hazard and risk matrices and explore how these hazards lead to direct and indirect impacts through climate impact chains. This analysis supports the identification of adaptation options, which outline practical actions that communities can take to address the underlying drivers of vulnerability and risk. Disaster preparedness elements, including evacuation planning, communications, and early warning arrangements, are integrated into this stage to ensure coherence between adaptation and disaster risk reduction.

The final stage of the process focuses on consolidating this analysis into a CBAP, led by the CDCCC. The plan documents priority actions, the hazards they address, the

capacity and resources available within the community, and indicative timeframes for implementation. Draft plans are presented to the wider community for validation, allowing community members to review priorities, suggest revisions, and endorse actions reflected in the plan. This validation step reinforces accountability and ensures that the CBAP reflects collective agreement rather than the views of a limited group.

Throughout the CBAP process, participatory tools such as flipcharts, maps, and visual materials are used to support inclusive engagement, and planning outputs are intentionally left in communities for ongoing reference and use. The process is designed to be engaging, even for community stakeholders who may not be literate or formally educated in a classroom.

Following a community validation, plans are compiled into nationally standardised templates and subjected to a quality assurance process to ensure consistency, completeness, and alignment with national climate change and disaster risk management guidance.

Finalised plans are reviewed and endorsed by the Department of Climate Change along with area council representatives. Once endorsed, plans are returned to communities, reinforcing local ownership and enabling communities to use the recognised plans to support implementation and engagement with government and partners. All templates, training guides, and facilitation materials have been developed by government agencies with the objective of standardising the community-based adaptation planning process across contexts.

Key components of the CBAP development process:



ASSESSMENTS

Gather baseline information.



CDCCC FORMATION AND FOUNDATIONS

Develop governance structures and establish foundational knowledge of terminology.



IMPACT AND HAZARD MAPPING

Identify local hazards, past impacts and adaptive capacity.



DISASTER RESPONSE AND ADAPTATION PLANNING

Develop response strategies for climate hazards.



COMMUNITY VALIDATION

Socialise and validate with communities the disaster response plan, emergency plan and adaptation plan.

Climate risk and vulnerability assessment at community level

Climate risk and vulnerability assessment under the CBAP approach is undertaken as a participatory process that combines local knowledge with facilitated analysis of climate and disaster risks. Communities are supported to identify the climate hazards they experience, understand how these hazards have changed over time, and examine their impacts on livelihoods, food security, infrastructure, health, and natural resources. Tools such as historical timelines, seasonal calendars, transect walks, community mapping, and hazard and risk matrices are used to surface local experience and evidence, while also strengthening shared understanding among community members.

A critical challenge within this process is supporting communities to move beyond a primarily disaster focused framing of risk toward a deeper consideration of long-term climate change impacts. Many participatory tools and local discussions are understandably grounded in recent disasters and extreme events, which are tangible and immediate. While this provides a strong entry point for engagement, it can limit attention to slower onset changes such as shifting rainfall patterns, ecosystem degradation, and cumulative impacts on livelihoods.

Expectations that communities can meaningfully engage with the full complexity of climate uncertainty – such as exploring multiple future scenarios, interacting climatic drivers, or probabilistic risk – should be approached with care. Community knowledge is necessarily grounded in lived experience, which provides a strong and legitimate basis for understanding risk, but may offer fewer reference points for anticipating unprecedented or emerging climate impacts. Facilitated assessment processes seek to extend this understanding by linking historical experience to observed trends and available climate information; however, there are practical limits to how far participatory methods alone can address the analytical demands of longer-term climate projections. In this sense, climate risk and vulnerability assessment functions as a bounded process: it generates a locally grounded and credible understanding of risk, while benefiting from complementary technical analysis to inform future-oriented adaptation decisions.



VCCRP staff with background of hazard maps and historical records developed by communities. Photo: Matthew Hardwick/Climate Finance Capacity Support Program NZ

Attention needs to be given to differential exposure and vulnerability within communities, including the experiences of women, youth, people with disabilities, and other marginalised groups. Nonetheless, vulnerability in the context of climate change can be difficult to capture fully, as structural drivers – such as land tenure arrangements, livelihood dependence, or mobility constraints – often interact with climate impacts in gradual and cumulative ways that are less visible through event-based analysis alone. Participatory assessments help surface these dynamics over time, while also highlighting the importance of continued learning and engagement beyond a single planning cycle.

Identification and prioritisation of adaptation options

Building on the climate risk and vulnerability assessment, communities are supported to identify and prioritise adaptation options through structured, participatory analysis. Rather than focusing solely on immediate hazards or response measures, the process encourages communities to examine chains of direct and indirect impacts associated with climate risks, and to identify adaptation actions that address underlying drivers of vulnerability.

In practice, however, the transition from disaster risk management to climate change adaptation is uneven and contested. Communities often prioritise actions that align with existing experience, institutional messaging, or visible risks, resulting in a strong emphasis on preparedness and response. While these actions are often appropriate and necessary, they may not be sufficient to address longer term climate change or enable more transformational adaptation. Facilitated planning processes can broaden this framing, but they cannot fully overcome the limits imposed by uncertainty, constrained information, and the absence of clear short-term incentives for investing in long-term change.

The conflation of geological hazards – such as tsunamis, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions – with those of climatic hazards is a serious challenge in the hazard-prone Vanuatu. The educational outreach that is a part of the CBAP process attempts to provide further clarity for communities on the impacts and hazards relating to a changing climate, but communities are encouraged to include non-climatic hazards as well when formulating a “Disaster Plan”, which is traditionally supported by the National Disaster Management Office. There is an understanding of cascading impacts caused by climate change in combination with threats posed from non-climate hazards, so the approach utilised by VCCRP seeks to fully support risk reduction planning while engaging with CDCCCs.

There is also a risk of overestimating the degree to which communities can independently design adaptation options that account for multiple possible futures, trade-offs, and systemic change. Many transformational adaptation options – such as shifts

in settlement patterns, livelihood transitions, or ecosystem management at scale – require coordination, resources, and policy support beyond the community level. Participatory prioritisation therefore tends to reflect what communities know, what feels achievable, and what aligns with current capacities and projects, rather than an exhaustive exploration of optimal adaptation under future climate scenarios.

Adaptation options are identified by communities themselves and may include actions that can be implemented using local resources, alongside measures that require external technical or financial support. While this reinforces local ownership and avoids the creation of aspirational wish-lists, it also means that adaptation planning remains incremental in many cases, shaped by current knowledge and experience. The process thus highlights the importance of linking community-based adaptation planning to broader institutional, technical, and policy mechanisms capable of supporting more complex and longer-term adaptation over time. Effective adaptation planning requires careful differentiation between actions that communities can undertake with project facilitation, and those critical adaptation needs that fall outside community control and necessitate external technical analysis, financing, and system level support, while managing expectations transparently.



Maiten and Pauline carry a tray of saplings to be planted in a community nursery on an island in Shefa Province, Vanuatu.
Photo: Conor Ashleigh/Save the Children

Capacity strengthening

Capacity strengthening and knowledge transfer are embedded throughout the CBAP process rather than being treated as standalone activities, and are increasingly understood as a continuous learning process that needs to be reinforced. Communities are supported through structured awareness raising and training on climate change, disaster risk reduction, and adaptation concepts using standardised, locally developed materials. Experience underlines the importance of developing these materials in local languages and formats that are tested and validated with communities, particularly where climate concepts have no direct linguistic equivalents and require careful translation, visual explanation, and contextual grounding.

At the same time, the process highlights ongoing challenges in the production and dissemination of effective learning materials. Delivering accessible information in remote settings, for people with low or emerging literacy, requires materials that are durable, portable, and usable without digital infrastructure, as well as facilitation approaches that prioritise dialogue and visual learning over text based content. While progress has been made, there remains a clear need to further invest in the co development, refinement, and wider distribution of learning tools that can support sustained understanding over time.



Participants of a Community Based Adaptation Planning workshop discuss impact chains. Photo: Colm Haughey/Vanuatu Visuals

Early lessons learned

Early experience under the VCCRP with the development of CBAPs reflects well-documented lessons from the CBA literature about the challenges of implementing standardised approaches at scale. Applying a common planning framework across 282 geographically and socially diverse communities located in different islands requires flexibility in how facilitation is delivered, even when core tools and steps remain consistent. This balance between standardisation and local adaptation has been essential for participation and relevance, but it has also resulted in variations in pacing, depth of analysis, and how comprehensive the final planning outputs are.

As an example, the planning process relies on simple, accessible materials that support effective participation in communities. However, this creates an additional challenge when converting handwritten and visual outputs into digitised templates and ensuring accurate, consistent data management at scale. The process has also highlighted difficulties in consistently linking vulnerability assessment and community profile information collected through surveys with participatory planning activities, particularly where data outputs are technical or aggregated and not immediately accessible for community level reflection and prioritisation.

Also, the CBAP development requires sustained engagement over several days, often competing with livelihoods and other community priorities. While the use of voluntary efforts through CDCCCs strengthens legitimacy and local ownership, it also risks sustainability and continuity.

Additionally, communities tend to favour actions that are familiar, immediately useful, and achievable with available time and resources. This is clearly reflected in the analysis of emerging priorities across the CBAPs that have been developed by the project so far. Despite wide geographic and contextual differences, plans consistently prioritise a smaller set of actions – most notably safe housing, water system upgrades, and distribution of seeds and seedlings. These priorities reflect lived experience of recent climate hazards such as cyclones and pressures due to food insecurity, and demonstrate a strong overlap between climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction. The consistency of priorities provides some evidence base for focusing investments but also highlights the tendency for community planning to emphasise incremental and near-term responses rather than longer-term or transformative change.

Experience also confirms that facilitation plays a significant role in shaping outcomes. Participatory processes are not neutral: how risks are discussed and which options are explored influence both understanding and prioritisation. CBAPs should therefore be understood as learning-based and iterative outputs, reflecting current knowledge and conditions, rather than fixed strategies. Effective adaptation planning benefits from clearly distinguishing between actions communities can advance with project support and those priority adaptation needs that require wider technical expertise, financing, and system level support, while maintaining open and transparent communication on what support is possible and to be expected.

Early learning from the project highlights the value of strengthening the capacity and agency of CDCCCs, including strengthening connections to decentralised planning processes and service delivery to reinforce and sustain locally-led efforts. Viewed in this way, CBAPs provide important entry points into longer term adaptation pathways, which can be progressively strengthened through complementary technical analysis, policy alignment, and financing mechanisms to translate local priorities into lasting and scalable outcomes. Building on early CBAPs, the project is working to systematically aggregate community identified priorities so they can inform adaptation planning and decision making at area council, provincial, and national levels.

Overall, the VCCRP continues to learn from this experience about what it takes to work effectively with communities to develop adaptation plans that are both locally meaningful and practically implementable. As the project progresses, these lessons are helping to refine approaches that better align community priorities with technical support and institutional systems, strengthening the role of CBAPs in bridging gaps between local action and longer-term climate resilience outcomes.

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