

# *Resettlement and Recovery in Vanuatu*

Australia Assists' Support to the  
Ambae Volcano Emergency







Photo credits:  
This page: Ministry of Agriculture and NDMO staff at work during a food distribution for evacuated Ambae communities.  
Cover page: Australia Assists deployee Mark Vaughan walks alongside a Red Cross staff member on Maewo Island, Vanuatu.

## Program context

The Australia Assists Program, delivered by RedR Australia, is the Australian Government's deployable humanitarian capability, designed to support overseas partners (particularly national governments) before, during and after disasters. To date, the Program has deployed eight specialists from the RedR Australia Humanitarian Roster to support the Ambae volcano emergency response.

## Emergency context

Since 2017, high levels of volcanic activity on the island of Ambae have led to ash fall, gas emissions, acid rain, and the looming threat of a full volcanic eruption. In September 2017, the Government of Vanuatu (GoV) declared a State of Emergency which led to the first evacuation and repatriation of the people of Ambae. In April 2018, the Government of Vanuatu declared another State of Emergency, which necessitated a second evacuation of Ambae's population for the safety of the island's communities. Australia Assists deployees have been providing assistance since the first eruption and continue to support the response through the Office of the Prime Minister, the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO), the Department of Women, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and UN Women.

Recovery efforts have been challenging, as there was little response to the government's call for funding beyond emergency support, according to Australia Assists Field Project Manager with the Vanuatu NDMO, Mark Vaughan. The customary (established tribal) system on Maewo has, however, proven very pro-active in establishing land for Ambae evacuees. Customary ceremonies were performed to welcome Ambae evacuees into the Maewo tribal systems and have allocated land within their communities to build second homes.

Now that the state of emergency has ended (26 November 2018), many Ambae communities are returning back to Ambae largely out of frustration for the slow pace of support for evacuees. Mark has found it more effective to work within the customary system on Maewo to build shelters for those who do not have a home to return to. The materials for 22 homes were sent to Maewo and are currently being constructed by communities.

## Australia Assists' engagement in the response

Before the GoV declared a State of Emergency requiring permanent resettlement from Ambae, Australia Assists deployee Jodie Clark was already working as a Supply Chain Management Specialist with the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Biosecurity to support the Ambae Volcano response. Jodie supported the ministry to manage a project that involved the use of plastic and shade cloth to protect nurseries on Ambae and surrounding islands from volcanic ash and acid rain. They also built nurseries on neighbouring island, Ambrym, and provided training for farming in an ash environment.

Just before the State of Emergency was declared, Brian Smart was deployed for twelve months (from March 2018) as a Disaster Management Specialist to the Vanuatu NDMO through Australia Assists. One of his key priorities has been to support the Ambae volcano response. Upon arrival, Brian was tasked with developing the evacuation plan for 8,500 people on Ambae to new locations, including the nearby islands of Santo and Maewo. Brian has also been instrumental in establishing the operational and reporting structure, cluster strategies and financial plans to ensure the evacuation occurred as quickly, efficiently and safely as possible. *"To help evacuate 8,500 people off the island in a very, very short timeframe and with no injuries is really an achievement that I am quite proud of,"* says Brian.

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- Brian Smart, Disaster Management Specialist to the Vanuatu NDMO





Australia Assists deployee Nimarta Khuman with colleagues from the Department of Women's Affairs, Port Vila.

One of the first things Brian did was support assessments for response and resettlement, and develop a ToR for a logistics support deployment. This resulted in the two-month deployment of **Janette Smith as a Logistics Generalist**, who was able to guide the NDMO to improve their logistics capability, including reinvigorating the Logistics Cluster and creating online resources for sharing and collaboration. Janette also introduced warehousing procedures for the Niscol Warehouse in Santo and instructed the Provincial Disaster Officer in basic warehousing management and reporting processes.

## The second phase of Australia Assists' support

Jodie, Brian and Janette's efforts were supported by the arrival of three additional Australia Assists deployees since June, with the State of Emergency extended in early July. Together, the four deployees worked closely to support the NDMO to manage the response, including the Second Home policy supported by the Vanuatu Government. The Second Home policy was conceived in agreement with the community of nearby Maewo Island, who agreed to host more than 2,000 Ambaen evacuees. **"On Maewo, existing communities agreed to host Ambaen**

**communities with a view to completing a customary reunion between tribes and families in the long term,"** says Brian. **"These people will either permanently resettle on Maewo, or will look to establish a second home on Maewo that, once they return to Ambae, can be used as place of safe shelter during any future volcanic eruptions."**

One of these additional deployees was **Jeff Barnard**, who commenced in June 2018 as the **Emergency Resettlement Coordinator with the NDMO**. This work has been challenged by a continually changing work environment due to Government decisions and land disputes. The latest government decision suggests that the evacuees should remain in host communities and be adopted into the tribes long term. Many issues relating to this process are being worked through and the State Law Office is soon to draft an agreement detailing conditions for land use.

Long term security of land is critical to Ambae communities and central to successful resettlement. To support the execution of the Second Home policy, Jeff has been working hard to facilitate the logistics and negotiations needed to assist evacuees to resettle on Maewo. For Jeff,



Australia Assists deployees Brian, Natalie and Jeff in Port Vila, Vanuatu.

the Second Home policy provides an innovative solution to a common humanitarian response challenge, particularly in Vanuatu as the most disaster-prone country in the world.

**"I do think it's a really innovative concept, the idea of creating a second home,"** says Jeff. **"People do have a strong connection to land, and this means that in the future people don't necessarily have to permanently move from their customary or traditional home sites. Given the ongoing nature of the volcanic activity, it's really important to create a safe haven that people can go to if there is an emergency."**

Jeff developed a Maewo Response and Recovery Plan alongside his NDMO colleagues and the Clusters. **"It includes short, medium and long-term projects to support not just shelter, but things like food security and livelihoods, WASH, the whole spectrum of things that you need to create a safe environment. I'm simply here to help facilitate that as much as I can,"** says Jeff.

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- Jeff Barnard, Emergency Resettlement Coordinator, NDMO





**Natalie Gyles, Information Management Specialist with the NDMO**, arrived in September and assisted in informing the Response and Recovery Plan. Natalie has been a critical member of the team during the emergency, taking a lead role in the collection and management of data about the crisis to help inform the decision-making process as efficiently as possible. With a strong technical background in information technology and information management, Natalie has ensured that the complex data collection, analysis and synthesis activities were turned into useable information at every phase of the response.

In September, **Mark Vaughan** also joined the response, deployed as a **Field Project Manager with the Vanuatu NDMO** for four months. Mark has been working within a cross-sector team to assist in the management of daily activities on the ground in Maewo at relocation sites and provide practical recommendations and input to inform sector groups, Government and partners. ***“A lot of what I am working on is looking at the broader scope of operations,”*** says Mark. ***“I’ve brought strong project management skills to Maewo, so I’m looking at what needs to be done and breaking it down into smaller tasks, and looking at the resources, materials and timeframes to achieve that.”***

Despite the changing environment, much has been achieved during Mark, Jeff and Natalie’s deployments, including finding and surveying appropriate sites for the resettlement program on Maewo and overseeing the commencement of construction. Jeff has also contributed to good coordination for the response, involving the Department of Strategic Planning, Policy and Aid

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- Mark Vaughan, Field Project Manager, Vanuatu NDMO



Photo credit: Nimarta Khuman





Coordination (DSPPAC) in recovery operations and planning, as well as linking the national and provincial governments to ensure a common humanitarian objective across agencies.

Also supporting the response since August through a deployment to the **Vanuatu Government's Department of Women's Affairs, is Gender and Protection Advisor, Nimarta Khuman**. In collaboration with Gender and Protection Cluster partners in Port Vila, Maewo and Santo, Nimarta's role has been to support coordination in areas such as strategy, localisation, gender mainstreaming and protection throughout every part of the response. Nimarta and her counterparts are advocating for community-centred approaches and the recognition of gender and protection concerns across sectors and budgets in diverse ways, from working on initiatives to prevent gender-based violence to ensuring people with a disability are able to access assistive devices and rehabilitation.

***"Protection is really important in times of disaster, to ensure that any assistance is delivered to people with respect and dignity,"*** says Nimarta. ***"Whether we're working across health, WASH, food insecurity, or shelter, we need to make sure that gender and protection issues have been mainstreamed and integrated across the response."*** One example is WASH infrastructure, where considerations such as lighting, privacy, overcrowding, disability access and adequate menstrual hygiene facilities must be ensured. There are also issues such as psychosocial trauma, lack of finance and shelter, leading to risks of gender-based and family violence.

The Cluster has been successful in disseminating information on the rights of evacuees in displacement and referral pathways for gender-based violence and child protection to affected communities. Funds have been secured through the Cluster for programming including women's recovery, child friendly spaces, peacebuilding and support for people living with disabilities.

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- Nimarta Khuman , Gender and Protection Advisor, Department of Women's Affairs, Vanuatu

***"These are some of the issues that we are working on within gender and protection, but also in other agencies to make sure that the response is inclusive, and the most vulnerable access assistance across all parts of Vanuatu,"*** says Nimarta.

With the State of Emergency having now ended, a National Recovery Plan has been approved for people who were displaced to islands across Vanuatu and those who are planning to return to Ambae to rebuild. The team remains optimistic about the next steps in the response. ***"From working through the process of land issues and negotiations when I arrived, to now being on the cusp of seeing permanent results for people on the ground, that's a fantastic achievement – so watch this space!"*** comments Jeff.

Photos: Ian Parish, RedR Australia





Australia Assists deployee Mark Vaughan with Red Cross volunteer and Ambae evacuee Maurice in Vanuatu.





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